Introduction: Under the Cover of Darkness

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This might all be futile. By its very nature, a bootleg defies definition. It travels in black markets and hides in unmarked record sleeves; it communicates in the errors of cheap production and escapes into the loopholes of property law. It cares little for the stability a definition might offer. To define a bootleg would be to contain it. It creates order where mess is much more welcome. Definitions, language, and names clarify, but they also tend to pin things down. A bootleg's survival is dependent on its ambiguity. Maybe we can talk about a bootleg while resisting the urge to define it. Maybe we can open it up, explore its edges, extend them outward, or destroy them altogether.

I began my bootleg research at the Walker Art Center in 2018, at a moment when the act seemed precariously balanced on a brink of either evolution or implosion. (As an aside I've come to appreciate the term "bootleg research," as not only a description of what I was studying, but also how: in the time and space outside of "legitimate" work, embracing an element of non-professionalism, and finding pleasure in the scrappy nature of my efforts.) My interest in the subject began with my background in music and grew further with a collision of creative observations. On one end, I became aware of a particular visual trend in graphic design, and on the other, I was witnessing an increasing number of unexpected fashion collaborations: Vetements/DHL, Telfar/White Castle, Balenciaga/Bernie Sanders. Where they overlapped was an awkward juxtaposition of high and low culture, corporate branding and lo-fi aesthetics, critical irony and authentic fandom. There were moments when I felt genuinely excited to see bootlegging embraced on such a public scale. Like how conversations around homage, appropriation, and theft—which feel

normal in the world of contemporary art—were now being reimagined in the spaces of popular culture, social media, and the creative industry as a whole. At other times I felt the gesture growing stale and superficial, reduced to a set of Photoshop effects implemented to tap into a viral cultural zeitgeist.

I began an interview series published by The Gradient[1] called Unlicensed in an attempt to learn from artists and designers who seemed to deploy bootlegging in unexpected or abstract ways. I questioned what the act meant at a time when copying is embedded in nearly every aspect of our culture. Could the gesture remain potent, liberating, subversive, transgressive? Could bootlegging transcend objects? Is it possible to bootleg yourself? And how might the act become a tool of resistance? In China, for example, where strict censorship policies prevent the dissemination of globalized media, bootlegging is an essential tool for freedom of expression and dissent. And while my research focuses on bootlegging as an artistic gesture, it's important to acknowledge that the act outside of this context is often one of economic or political necessity. Hopefully, these conversations will bring further awareness to the communities who depend on its effects in their day to day lives.

What follows is an attempt to begin to unpack the possibilities of bootlegging today... ways that the bootleg itself might be bootlegged, smuggled from its place in tradition and history into new contexts, concepts, and ideas.

I. Cover Version

For one day in 2016, the art practice OOIEE draped the works on display at the Aspen Art Museum with

a textile printed with an image of the sky. Wrapped in pieces of the sky, works by Ryan Gander, Anna Sew Hoy, and Diana Thater became air... but they also became covers, like a punk version of a Robert Breer. In the act of covering the pieces, OOIEE also managed to *cover* the pieces. You know what I mean? A cover can envelop the work but it can also open it up. The best covers tend to create space; between the original and the reproduction, between "the artist" and OOIEE, between the thing and well... everything else, even the sky? A cover asks what is possible within what is given. These artworks, these amorphous sheets of blue, demonstrate what a cover is capable of when put to task... which is really a lot more than we've come to expect. Like on Cat Power's *The Covers Record* where she performs *Satisfaction* without even singing the chorus. Is it even the same song? Maybe we're asking the wrong questions.

Lately I've been thinking of a cover as a type of translation. A good translation is more than just semantic. A translator must find what is "unfathomable, mysterious, and poetic"[2] in the original and interpret this essence in a new language. Translation becomes "a form of displacement, a way to enrich life."[3] Coleman Barks, a renowned Rumi translator, describes his process as a trance. His translations prioritize feeling over fidelity. "It feels like a different kind of something outside the mind. I call it the heart of the soul, but it's somewhere different than my ordinary mentality."[4] A translation doesn't come *from*, it moves *through*. Like a translation or a cover, a bootleg might aspire to something greater than a reproduction. It should open up space for the possibility to transform and, when pushed, maybe even transcend. But of course not all covers are created with such grand aspirations. Let's

look at a cover in its simplest form, one that measures its success through the fidelity of its reproduction. Let's call it a mimetic cover.

In the global subculture of Elvis impersonation (which includes an intense competitive circuit), greatness is defined by how closely one can get to becoming the King. There is no intent to adjust or update, rather the self disappears and in its place is a white leather jumpsuit, thick sideburns, and gold rimmed glasses. But an Elvis impersonator must do more than look the part... it involves research, practice, and nuance. "My respect for Elvis should shine through. I know I'm not Elvis, but I hope that when I perform, people might forget that for a moment."[5] Elvis impersonators perform mimetic covers, an act perhaps closest to our traditional understanding of a bootleg. A counterfeit Louis Vuitton bag is successful only when it performs as the real thing. At the core of a mimetic cover is hómage. But a cover's ability to celebrate its source can go further, and in doing so can become something else. Let's call this an interpretive cover.

Anthony Huberman describes homage as falling somewhere between admiration and research. "A tribute is neither an analysis nor just a party. Giving a toast is about making people care, not about making them understand." A cover, then, opens up the possibility to express admiration in a way that emphasizes *affect* over *effect*, "I love it" over "I get it."[6] Let me give you an example... The song *All Along the Watchtower* was written and recorded by Bob Dylan in 1967 and appeared on the album *John Wesley Harding*. The sparse and wandering track sparked curiosity for its enchanting lyrical mysticism. One year later, Jimi Hendrix, after hearing an early tape of the track, recorded a cover. Using the same foun-

dational elements as Dylan's original, Hendrix transformed the folk saga into a psychedelic anthem. "It overwhelmed me, really" said Dylan, "He found things that other people wouldn't think of finding in there. I took license with the song from *his* version, actually, and continue to do it to this day." Hendrix's cover is an interpretive one, an evolution through the stylistic sensibilities of a new performer. An interpretive cover begins to demonstrate how something new might come from within the constraints of the original. It's a powerful gesture of transformation, but still, maybe a cover can do more...

The song *Respect* was first recorded by Otis Redding and was released on the 1965 album *Otis Blue*. On top of the track's soulful groove, Redding chauvinistically demands respect from "his woman" after a long day at work. But the *Respect* most of us are familiar with isn't Redding's. Two years after the original, Aretha Franklin recorded her own rendition of the song. The track surpasses a stylistic interpretation with added lyrics that have become its signatures: the R-E-S-P-E-C-T breakdown and the repetition of "Sock it to me." The most powerful change, however, is the context of "respect" considering the realities of Franklin as a Black woman in the late 1960s, early 1970s. The song was able to tap into a much broader social consciousness. It aligned with the civil rights and women's rights movements, and propelled the track from a misogynist jingle into an anthem of liberation. "The song was a demand for something that could no longer be denied. She had taken a man's call for respect from a woman... and flipped it. The country had never heard anything like it."[7]

The track demonstrates that even in repetition there is always a "quality of difference"— a cover is

never *just* "the same thing but rather a progression or regression" providing "philosophical insight about the shape of time and history."[8] "Respect" is a transcendent cover. If a mimetic cover repeats and a transformational cover shifts, then a transcendent cover "stutters."

Just as Gilles Deleuze used the idea of making language stutter through exposing and subverting its constraints, so too can a cover infiltrate an original and reveal its borders. And despite this necessity of a cover to work within the limitations of its original, there remains a possibility (as demonstrated by Franklin) for these structures to be manipulated. Constraints can become expansive when turned against themselves. To consider a bootleg as a cover allows the gesture to unfold beyond celebration and homage. As we cover or bootleg we also update, evolve, shift, deconstruct; at times we even destroy.

II. Anti-Illusion

In physics the term "dark matter" is used to describe that which makes up as much as 83% of the universe, yet is virtually undetectable. Dark matter can only be perceived by its effects on other things. "Dark matter neither emits nor scatters light. It is believed to be fundamentally important in the cosmos and yet there is essentially no direct evidence of its existence and little understanding of its nature."[9] Taken outside of the realm of science, we can think of dark matter as a form of invisible social scaffolding... organizations, structures, attitudes, and ideals that are vague and indefinite yet produce very real effects. Take, for example, a pair of Nikes. These shoes are the result of the company's corporate pol-

icies and culture, the legal frameworks it works within, wider societal fashions, creative trend forecasting, and various economic and environmental considerations... all of this is the dark matter.

Our current form of globalized capitalism is another form of dark matter. It is a considerable force in nearly every decision we make, yet manages to remain almost entirely undetectable. The products of such a society are complicit in keeping this dark matter (the violence and inequality upon which the system relies) dark. Its effects only become tangible in the detritus that falls outside of its oversight. A bootleg is an example of this debris. It's an anachronism, an inconsistency, a glitch in the capitalist matrix. A bootleg stares into the audience from its place on stage and breaks the fourth wall. It becomes a disruption to a much greater collective illusion... we might even call it an anti-illusion.[10]

Anti-illusionist theatre was developed by the playwright Bertolt Brecht, who considered traditional theater a "branch of the narcotics business." He believed that at any given performance the audience would "hang up their brains with their hats in the cloakroom."[11] Brecht had witnessed the power of political propaganda during both World Wars and understood how entertainment can easily distract from more pressing political and social issues. To break this spell, he devised the concept of "epic theater," a set of techniques to transform the grandiose into the grotesque. "Anti-illusions" (also translated as "alienation effects") were an essential element to this newly conceived theory. Brecht began formulating alienation effects following a performance by Mei Lanfang's theater company in Moscow. Throughout the play he was struck by the actors' expressed awareness of being

watched. "Their purpose, it seemed, was to appear strange and even surprising to the audience."[12] Brecht was interested in the way this level of absurdity created distance between the drama and the audience. The spectator becomes more inclined to engage with the play on a cerebral (rather than emotional) level and is less likely to be consumed by the illusion. Let me give you some examples...

> Narration: A reminder that the play is a presentation of a story. This might involve revealing events before they happen so as to prevent the audience from getting invested in the storyline.
>
> Breaking the scene: The character removes themself from the current situation so as to comment, as the actor, on how that character might be feeling.
>
> Performing the mechanics: The actor calls out stage directions such as "cue the violins" to bring attention to the methods that influence emotion.

Brecht saw these devices not just as creative techniques, but as social strategies of resistance. From the absurdity, we are brought back to reality. The bootleg works in a similar way. In its often absurd use of language, materials, and graphics, it becomes an anti-illusion calling attention to the oppressive and inequitable systems from which it was created. As it travels, it causes ripples and holes in the "grey curtain of capitalism."[13] The bootleg, even in the innocuous form of a T-shirt or mobile phone, yields power.

The GooApple is a bootleg smartphone from China that looks identical to the iPhone but uses an Android operating system that's customized to resemble Apple's iOS.[14] It's an example of shanzhai, a term used to describe a fake, copy, or counterfeit in Chinese culture. The neologism gained popularity around 2008 in the field of consumer electronics and has since evolved to encompass read/write culture, copy/paste creativity, and anti-authoritarian grassroots efforts. Shanzhai has infiltrated nearly every industry in China. There are shanzhai garments, shanzhai TV shows, shanzhai galas, and even a Shanzhai Nobel Prize. These products, once universally ridiculed, have become celebrated by creative think tanks for embracing a DIY attitude unbothered by copyright and IP. Their disregard for notions of "originality," "authenticity," and "ownership" is flaunted in their logo flips and brand name bricolage. The GooApple phone is a 21st century Dadaist collage, a rejection of the rationale of modern capitalist society. The device chooses to embrace the absurdity often hidden beneath the gleam of the surface.

The anti-illusionist language of Shanzhai culture might best be captured in the counterfeit graphic T-shirts archived by the collective Shanzhai Lyric. With their research, artists Ming Lin and Alex Tatarsky frame TikTok truisms from bootleg shirts into an ongoing poem sourced from the detritus of consumerism. With phrases like "ART IS WAY OF CHIC," shiny "broken" English becomes both decoration and description, indicating rupture on a wider level."[15] The smooth language of capitalism breaks down and the dark matter is exposed. The graphic design studio Metahaven understood the capacity of a joke to "resist and overturn the frame of reference imposed by any

political status quo."[16] Shanzhai T-shirts, often humorous in their level of absurdity, might do the same. To consider the bootleg as an anti-illusion is to understand it as a disruptor, an agitator, an instigator. As it moves, it flaunts the scars left by dark matter to remind us of its dislocation, marginalization, and violence. Its refusal (or failure?) to conform serves as a reminder of the fragility of the capitalist illusion. It is a demonstration that one of the most powerful effects of the fake is to remind us of what is real.

III. Alternative Archive

By 2025, MoMA will have 1.2 petabytes (1.2 million gigabytes) of artworks stored digitally on magnetic tape...Warhol's film archive alone takes up half a petabyte. The magnetic tape, necessary to account for file corruption or obsolete formats, is stored in small cases, which are collectively held in a black box in the basement of the museum. It's an example of various archiving systems working in tandem... physical works, occupying digital space, converted back to a tangible container, all hidden away in a dusty (albeit enormous) basement.[17] Traditional archives take on many forms: from specialized facilities with meticulously regulated rooms like those of MoMA, to a shoebox of photos kept underneath the bed. Archives can be libraries, or museums, or most recently digital spaces... the internet itself is even archived. But traditional archives double in their function of preservation, in that they also act as storage. And sometimes things in storage are easy to forget. Let me give you an example...

From 2016 to 2018 I worked as the graphic design fellow for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

The museum is made up of seven galleries, spread out over five floors. The building, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, is intentionally disorienting, providing an opportunity for visitors to spend a day getting lost... after all, isn't that the purpose of contemporary art? Below the galleries, mostly unbeknownst to visitors, lies an equally complex and vast cultural labyrinth... the library. Although only a fraction of the size of the exhibition spaces above it, this "universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of...galleries."[18] Designers often sought the library as respite. Cell service was poor underground and a trip to the library meant an excuse to leave an email unanswered or dodge a co-worker looking for last-minute changes. On one particular occasion I decided to revisit the entire set of the Walker's in-house magazine, *Design Quarterly* and was struck by issue 89, 'Mindscapes.' The red cover was punctuated by silver display type: "SOTSASS" in layered lettering mimicking his Ultrafragola mirror, and "SUPER-STUDIO" in typography recalling the dimensional grids of the collectives' photomontages. We decided to bootleg the cover graphic onto a T-shirt. We produced a limited run and gave them to anyone interested. This small gesture transferred the *Design Quarterly* issue from one archive to another... from a library to a "cotton archive"[19] able to be accessed and disseminated by the simple act of wearing. 'Mindscapes,' once safely stored (and all but forgotten) in the stacks, was reactivated on an intimate level... quite literally enveloping any *body* interested in the radical Italian designers. The publication and the ideas within had been resurrected in a new and different form, liberated from the traditional archive and brought back to life to walk among us.

Walter Benjamin was also curious about the idea of resurrecting books. Benjamin all but names the act of bootlegging when listing the methods that a collector might apply to revive a forgotten treasure... "collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals..."[20] But what a bootleg makes up for in access, it forgoes in accuracy. A traditional archive is meticulous in its record keeping, a bootleg admittedly less so. Maybe there's something to be learnt in this slippage...

Shakespeare's First Folio, published seven years after his death, was thought to be the legitimate compendium of the playwright's works. The texts were compiled by friends of Shakespeare who made it their goal to be as faithful as possible to the playwright's original intent. The full title *Mr. William Shakespeare's comedies, histories, & tragedies. Published according to the true original copies* is a mouthful, but the last section, *Published according to the true original copies* is worth noting....Throughout his career William Shakespeare chose not to authorize written versions of his plays, instead wanting them to be exclusively for the stage. But the absence of tangible copies only forced fans of the playwright to become more entrepreneurial. In the likeness of latter-day Deadheads, audience members at the Globe Theatre would transcribe versions of the plays for reproduction and dissemination. These copies, full of errors and editorial liberties, became known as the Bad Quarto. In these versions, Hamlet's famous soliloquy goes as follows: "To be, or not to be; ay, there's the point. To die, to sleep–is that all? Ay, all." Despite the errors, the Bad Quarto (a Shakespeare bootleg) played a key role "in saving England's finest body of drama

from oblivion."[21] Some historians have even questioned if its discrepancies are the result of other contextual factors like an actor stumbling over his lines, or an early draft of a work in progress. Thought of this way, is the Bad Quarto any different from a live bootleg of The Beatles or The Stones? In such instances, it's the slippage that makes them iconic. It has a way of bringing us closer, breaking down the divide of the stage or the studio...maybe even time?

As an alternative archive, a bootleg becomes a "parallel canon," a version of history running alongside, supporting, or at times undermining authorized accounts of the past. "Bootlegs open up and mine an imaginative space" they can "fill in the gaps," or leave room for "imagined artifacts."[22] Looking at both the authorized and unauthorized versions of a history allows the actual image "to emerge out of the cloud of virtual similars and dissimilars."[23] And the dissimilarities are significant, no matter how insignificant they might seem. Let me explain...

Leon Trotsky, in his text "The ABC of Materialist Dialectics," makes the argument that "a letter A is never equal to another letter A—it is not even equal to itself." In other words, to change is at the core of what it means to exist. Then perhaps the variations over generations of bootlegs are not the effects of shoddy production or the errors of an amateur archivist... they're signs of life. They're the bruises that occur when an idea or object is "compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution."[24] All of which are the risks of forgoing an archive for a continued, unpredictable existence.

Another thing about traditional archives is that they seem to appreciate a certain amount of dis-

tance... In a traditional archive, you're often asked to wear a pair of white gloves to handle the work, so that even when you're touching an object you're not really *grasping* it. The philosopher Roland Barthes thought about this distance when differentiating between the ideas of "Text" and "Work." As he describes it, a "Work" is something static and complete, analyzed and classified. A "Text," on the other hand, invites us in. It's malleable and prone to shift and stray and evolve and expand with each interaction. A "Text" "decants the work from its consumption and recuperates it as play, task, production, practice." Barthes calls on us to "play the text, release it, make it go."[25] A bootleg does that too, it invites us in. It requires no gloves or permissions. It asks us to engage so that it might remain in motion. But as we interact with bootlegs, how can we bring others into the process?

One last thing about a traditional archive, it's generally a solitary experience. But bootlegs are reliant on community ... a shared "visual bond."[26] In 2012 artist/curator/publisher Shannon Michael Cane launched the first iteration of Printed Matter's Bootleg T-shirt Show.[27] The show featured bootleg shirts designed by a selection of artists and designers, with graphics from music, queer history, and capitalist critique. Its proximity to Printed Matter is no coincidence. Bootlegs, especially when thought of as tools for preservation, can be easily embedded into the world of independent publishing: "Similar to how zines work, these shirts are about finding people already within our small community that share a very 'deep' interest in something very specific."[28] The bootleg also becomes an archival mechanism for underrepresented communities. "It naturally becomes something that we perceive as aligned with diversity,

minorities, activist political voices, queer culture—because no one is censoring it, which is so often what is happening in mainstream publishing, fashion, music, media, et cetera. It's a platform for raw expression."[29]

It's within these subcultures that we can understand the bootleg as a means of preservation in its most vital sense. As an alternative archive, a bootleg allows ideas and information to move through time, not as something fixed, but as something malleable. Walter Benjamin said, "to live means to leave traces,"[30] and that's what a bootleg does. Its existence is dependent on those around it to maintain it; it leaves traces and picks up new ones as it passes from hand to hand.

IV. Method Actor

A friend recently sent an article to me of an animal escape exercise at a zoo in Japan. In one photo, two people dressed up in a ridiculous zebra costume perform as the fugitive animal. The two actors not only look the part, they act the way you might expect a zebra to in this situation... skittish, confused, and weary of any passing human. In another image, the costumed creature stands outside the actual zebra's habitat, where the animal stares at the abomination with a look of sheer existential dread. I suppose you have to admire the zookeeper's dedication. The whole situation reminded me of another story...

In 1943 Marlon Brando began studying under Stella Adler, one of the teachers responsible for developing the method acting technique. In one exercise, she told her students to pretend to be chickens preparing for the attack of an atomic bomb. The students frantically waddled around the room. They made their arms into wings and they clucked and

screamed at their impending doom. Brando, however, sat still, stoic, a bit confused. When Adler asked Brando to give reason for his odd behavior, he replied, "I'm a chicken, what the hell do I know about bombs?" While Brando is often credited as the pioneering force for the method technique, it was in fact an actor by the name of Dilip Kumar who was the first to develop and employ the approach. In Indian cinema, he's regarded as "the ultimate method actor."[31] Kumar specialized in tragedy, and his work earned him respect for bringing a sense of realism to Bollywood. In fact, his connection with characters was so strong that he suffered a serious depression after performing a string of melancholy roles. A psychiatrist eventually gave him the advice to pursue comedy. Kumar developed his own technique out of a need to reconcile reality with the fantasy of cinema. "If the director comes up to me for a scene and says 'This is your mother. And she is now dead.' And every faculty of yours is against the idea that this woman is your mother...in a situation like that, your imagination needs to function. And that is when the brain starts to bring in memories of your own mother, and sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, puts you in touch with your emotions.'[32]

Method acting involves foregrounding the "art of experience," Kumar said. It requires a sense of embodiment greater than hitting marks and memorization. Method acting requires the actor to live in feelings analogous to those of the character in order to communicate authentically. To method act is to follow in the path of Jorge Luis Borges's Pierre Menard in his attempt to rewrite *Don Quixote* not by copying it, but by *becoming* Cervantes... by creating the conditions necessary so that the words arrive

no differently to Menard than they did to their original creator. Or in the case of the artist Robert Gober who, upon first seeing an Ellsworth Kelly painting, was utterly confused, "I couldn't figure out whether it was a joke or it was really smart, but it was way beyond me, like a language I didn't know how to read. I remember I went home and in the basement of our house I remade the painting to try to understand it."[33] The bootleg as a method actor is a form of research, a way to better understand an original. It embraces copying as a process and acknowledges that creation "demands long intense engagement with what has been in order to move forward."[34]

In China, ancient practice considered it a high honor for a painter to infiltrate the collection of a connoisseur with a forgery of an Old Master. If one succeeds, the forger becomes equal to the master.[35] Today the area of Dafen Village, located in Shenzhen, China, has become renowned for its community of artists specializing in oil painted replicas of past masters like Van Gogh, Dalí, da Vinci, and Rembrandt. In 1989, an oil painting dealer from Hong Kong came to the small village to commission copies of iconic paintings. Today Dafen has over 8,000 workers in the oil painting industry and its output makes up nearly 70% of the commercial paintings in Europe and American markets. But as the artists were copying, they were also studying and learning. They grew a discerning eye for light, color, composition, and gesture which lead to a "synthesis of a new personal style expressive of the individual and the copied past; a seeing double."[36] It reminds me of a group of works by the artist Allen Ruppersberg...

In 1973, the artist copied the entirety of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*[37] by hand. For Ruppers-

berg, the process was a way of entering into a personal discussion with the author. It was a way to reactivate the text.[38] A year later, he copied the entirety of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* onto twenty wall-sized canvases, working six days a week over the course of several months. The time-intensive method was "the only way of getting to the heart of the work. ... The second line of the poem which prefaces *Dorian Gray* reads: 'To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.' Anonymity can be a strategy in an ego-centric culture."[39] In one last piece of epic transcription titled *The Singing Posters*, Ruppersberg copied the entirety of Allen Ginsberg's *HOWL* phonetically onto a series of fluorescent signs. "Generation" becomes "je-nuh-RAY-shin"... the phonetics are a way to inhabit the work, to decipher and resuscitate each word as if learning to speak for the first time. To read *The Singing Posters* is to perform it, and in the process we become Ginsberg... we become *HOWL*, we become the protest, we become the oral tradition, we become the words and we become their meanings.

The artist Matt Olson once told me a story about bootlegging Guy de Cointet. Olson and his studio at the time, RO/LU, were creating furniture pieces lifted from shapes and objects found in the scenography of the artist. Posters from de Cointet performances were reimagined in the studio's signature plywood. At a certain point in the process, as Olson tells it, one begins to think about time and money and efficiency and output... the sort of things that try and make art rational, which is never really how it should be. Fed up, he cried out "Why in the fuck are we even doing this?" to which someone in the studio replied, "We're learning from these things in ways that no

one could teach us." It's about process... not so much the thing, but what the thing does to us. How it changes us, how we "become the things, people, and ideas we love."[40] It's about method acting. The bootleg as a method actor is about transformation, it's an act of *becoming*... but maybe not as we'd expect. As we learn through reenactment, through copying, through bootlegging, it is less about a relationship to a character from a script, and more about the process of becoming ourselves.

V: Knock Up

A knock up is not a knock off, it's an important distinction to make. A knock off is a counterfeit produced to deceive and pass as "authentic." A knock up is different. In China, there's a rating system for how accurate knock off products are in their deception. AAA-rated knock offs are near perfect, at times even better than the original—like a pair of Adidas with an added Nike swoosh. On the other end, Z-rated counterfeits are so far off from the original that they operate better as jokes than actual products. In China, knock-off products are often manufactured in the same factories as their "official" counterparts. In these day-night factories "you make shoes for Nike during the day, then you make Nike shoes for you during the night."[41] It's a mode of production that only further blurs the line between the original and the fake, disrupting the hierarchy that each implies. But as I mentioned, a knock up is not a knock off. The term knock up was created by the designer Daniel Day, better known as Dapper Dan.

Dan was a hustler-turned-designer in Harlem during the 1970s and 1980s. His interest in clothing

stemmed from the realization that on the street in his neighborhood, fashion was power. Dan eventually opened up his own boutique selling fur coats and leather jackets, and soon evolved to making custom versions of each for select clients. It wasn't until Dan witnessed the excitement surrounding a customers' Louis Vuitton bag that he understood the cachet of aspirational brands. At the time, "luxury goods were becoming status symbols, and European heritage brands that nobody had ever heard of, like Louis, Fendi, and Gucci, were entering the mainstream."[42] But the power of a luxury brand is predicated on limited access and exclusivity. These brands cater to a wealthy white audience despite growing interest and demand from other communities. Dan's goal was, in his own words, to "blackenize"[43] these brands. To create a design and production strategy to reclaim their signs and symbols for his community.

His first custom piece was a jacket with patterned sleeves made from a deconstructed Gucci garment bag. The jacket created a considerable amount of hype in the neighborhood, and with each new customer Dan was challenged to continuously one-up the last. As the designs deviated further from the brand's standard offerings, it became increasingly more apparent to audiences that Dan's items were not "authentic." "I knew none of [my customers] would be caught dead in a knock off, so I had to convince them that, while it had the high-end materials and craftsmanship of a luxury item, it was something new and different. They had to see that I had taken these brands and pushed them into new territory. I knocked them up, I didn't knock them off."

A knock up is a copy that chooses difference as a sign of resistance. Unlike a knock off, which aspires

to pass as legitimate, a knock up displays its illegitimacy as a refusal to participate in the oppressive structures it was created to challenge. I am reminded here of the artist David Hammons, or rather how the artist, writer, and curator Coco Fusco frames the work of Hammons. In a 1995 essay for *Frieze* magazine, Fusco addresses Hammons's work in parallel to the idea of "signifyin," a concept first proposed by the literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. According to Gates, signifyin "involves taking, twisting and transforming English to make it otherwise. It implicitly revindicates 'imitation' as a creative gesture, over and against a legacy of negative, Eurocentric appraisal of black literature and culture as unoriginal." Thought of in the context of Hammons's work "signifyin allows the artist to be influenced (by Dada and Klein, for instance) yet to twist the influence, blacken it, pastiche it, own it."[44] For Dapper Dan, a knock up does the same. It becomes a tool for the marginalized to "benefit from a capitalist model intended to exclude."[45] A knock up embraces illegitimacy," and in doing so "refuses to rely on the violence that organizes the social space of annunciations."[46] In the 1980s, the popularity of Dan's "knock ups" led to intense copyright litigation. Unable to keep up with exorbitant court fees, Dan was forced to close his business.

Illegitimacy is tricky. Although it often leaves a visual trace, aesthetics alone can be deceiving. The recent trend of "official" bootlegs shows how quickly illegitimacy can be used as strategy. It's an easy way to claim something as "authentic"... which just makes the whole thing feel inauthentic. Let me give you an example...

In the 2018 Gucci Cruise Show, creative director Alessandro Michele premiered a jacket that was ba-

sically an exact replica of a piece by Dapper Dan from 1989 (the original was designed with Louis Vuitton monograms, which Gucci converted to Gucci Gs). Although the brand backtracked by justifying the jacket as an homage, the stunt felt ill conceived given Dan was never consulted. Also, Gucci was one of the corporations that had prosecuted Dan in the past for copyright infringement. (Let's consider the Gucci jacket as a "knock down.") In the same show, the brand premiered a dress prominently displaying the text "GUCCY," a clear allusion to the misspellings often found on the brand's bootlegs. The entire show might have been considered progressive—a brand recognizing its imitators as essential to its popularity—but since then, the Gucci legal team has become no more relaxed. Clearly, if anyone's going to knock off Gucci, it's going to be Gucci.

Because illegitimacy can be so easily manipulated, it's worth considering how the idea might move past something tangible. Is it possible to knock up an idea or institution? In 2019, Czar Kristoff, an artist in the Philippines, began a project called Temporary UnRelearning Academy (Temporary URL) in response to the country's monolithic art education. What began as a book-pirating workshop led to classes, research sessions, and lectures while squatting at cyber cafes: "The idea of doing a workshop or organizing a school is based on the conditioning of what a school is supposed to be. You could look at what we were doing as a bootleg of an institution."[47]

Thinking about a bootleg institution, I am reminded of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's work *The Undercommons*. "It cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment.

In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony ... to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university."[48] Moten embraces the idea of unprofessionalism, bootlegging its definition as not beneath but beyond professionalization, an escape. A knock up, in its quest for illegitimacy, offers the same.

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Recently, I read an article on Hyperpop, a Gen-Z music genre that seems, even to its fans, both clear and confusing. It's one of those "you know it when you hear it" situations... more about a feeling than a definition. A.G. Cook is Hyperpop, but so is Kate Bush and J Dilla. Its very appeal is its resistance to classification. It reminded me of bootlegging. When I interviewed people for *Unlicensed*, I always began by asking them how they define a bootleg. The answers varied and at times contradicted themselves. Shirts were bootlegs but so were schools, sculptures, processes. Most people I spoke with never considered bootlegging a part of their practice; some failed to see the connection even after we spoke. That's what makes it so great, it's impossible to pin down. And really, these conversations and investigations might have only made things messier. Like I said... this might all be futile. Anthony Huberman says, "confusion is at the heart of wisdom" and as we remain open to the possibility of what bootleg is, or was, or might be in the future, it leaves us with far more questions than answers. But maybe that's OK. Maybe all that really means is that today the bootleg is

alive and well... and just when we think we've created any sort of definition, it slips away from us under the cover of darkness.

Notes

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6. Anthony Huberman, "Take Care," *Circular Facts*, ed. Binna Choi, Mai Abu ElDahab, and Emily Pethick (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2011), pp. 9–17.

7. DeNeen L. Brown "How Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' Became an Anthem for Civil Rights and Feminism," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2020, www.washington post.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/ 08/14/how-aretha-franklins-respect-became-an-anthem-for-civil-rights-and-feminism/.

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10. A great debt is owed to Canal Street Research Association (@canal_street_research) for bringing to light this connection between Brecht and bootlegs in an Instagram post on December 12, 2020.

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13. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2010).

14. Xiao Yuefan, "Maoism and Disruptive Creativity: Shanzhai—an Alternative Perspective," *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*, ed. Jeroen de Kloet et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 186–210; JSTOR www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvqr1bnw.15. Accessed April 26, 2021.

15. See Shanzhai Lyric in this book, pp. 118–147.

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18. Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2000).

19. See Experimental Jetset in this book, pp. 68–87.

20. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 2015), pp. 78–91.

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34. Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

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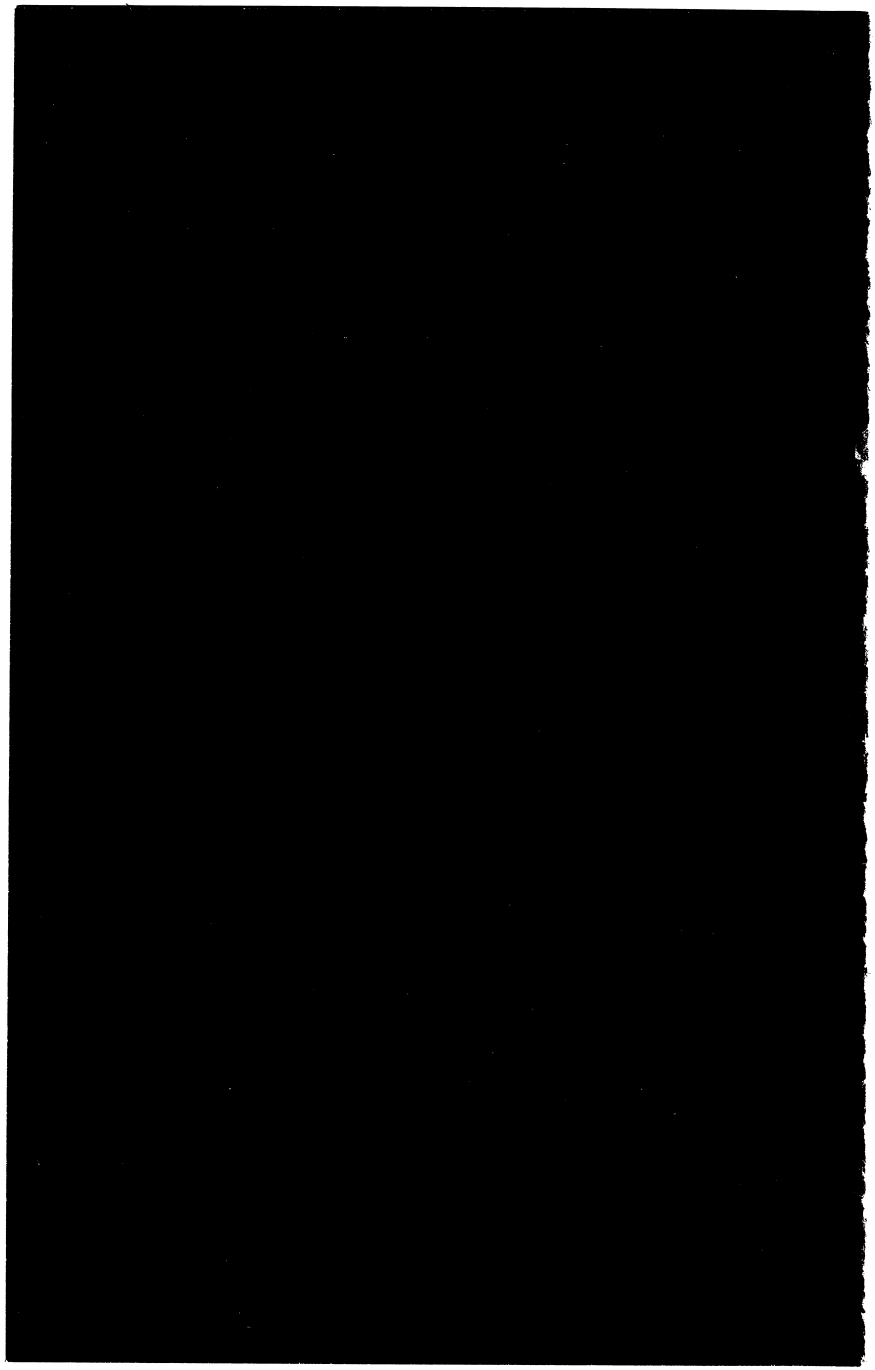
47. See Clara Balaguer and Czar Kristoff in this book, pp. 240–263.

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